

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 049

FL 018 367

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TITLE Every Classroom's a Stage: Theatrical Contributions to Language and Literature Teaching.  
PUB DATE Oct 89  
NOTE 16p.  
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)  
  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Class Activities; \*Classroom Techniques; \*Drama; \*Dramatics; \*French; Instructional Materials; \*Literature Appreciation; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning

## ABSTRACT

A discussion of use of theater in second language instruction describes one teacher's experience using French masterpieces in the language class. Illustrations are drawn from Racine's seventeenth-century classical tragedy "Andromaque." Five individual and group activities are described that are referred to as the Circle, the Interpreter, the Prompter, the Matchbox, and Human Geometry. The Circle begins as the collective exploration of a text, with the group gradually increasing its intellectual and linguistic mastery of the text. The exercise concludes with students contributing different interpretations of phrases or passages. In the Interpreter, one student reads a passage and another interprets it to the first student. The Prompter requires that some students prompt other students in performance for an imaginary audience. The latter two exercises facilitate mastery of syntactically difficult material. The Matchbox begins with the emptying of a matchbox onto the classroom floor or a table, then breaking a syntactically complex passage into as many units as is reasonable. At the end of each unit, a match is returned to the box. This activity helps students forget the complexity of a passage and focus on manageable units that reveal its basic structure. In Human Geometry, students and/or instructor choreograph intricate passages. (MSE)

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EVERY CLASSROOM'S A STAGE: THEATRICAL  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TEACHING

I will always remember 1980-81 as the year I adapted and directed a student production of Molière's Don Juan. During cast parties and subsequent conversations with students, many said they had learned more about literature, theatre and Molière by performing in a single production than by taking several literature courses. Their conclusion impressed me, although it didn't come as a complete surprise.

After all, whenever I taught French theatre, did I not remind students that drama wasn't written primarily to be read. Didn't I also emphasize that theatre was unique among literary genres precisely because it passed, by design, from dramatists' hands to those of directors and actors before being performed in front of a live audience. And hadn't I, consequently, always claimed that only those plays which had been and could continue to be performed, outside an academic setting, qualified as theatrical masterworks.

Nonetheless, such standard caveats began to ring somewhat hollow in light of student performers' comments. The latter continued to give me cause for reflection as did the apparent paradox that my student actors, learning how to deliver a set text well, simultaneously developed an unexpectedly fine ability to improvise. I became markedly curious to understand better how actors and directors meet the formidable linguistic and intellectual challenges they face. Therefore, while on sabbatical leave in 1987-88, I seized the opportunity to work with Le Studio Classique, a professional, Parisian troupe, specializing in the classical French repertory.

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My primary objective was to see how actors and directors came to grips with the same literature I approached as a teacher-scholar. As a result of this unorthodox consultation with other word professionals, I hoped to broaden and deepen my understanding of dramatic literature and discover ways to enrich language and literature teaching.

I returned with a myriad of ideas and observations. With patient support from students, I adapted several techniques and approaches, observed in Parisian theatres, to the North American classroom setting and had the satisfaction of seeing them work in several contexts.

This workshop is a further consultation with another group of word professionals. It will examine a representative sampling of individual and group activities, drawn from theatrical practice, which I have named the Circle, the Interpreter, the Prompter, the Matchbox and Human Geometry. It will also explore how theatrical perspectives can enhance teaching effectiveness and enrich classroom experience.

The passages used here, for demonstration purposes only, come from Jean Racine's seventeenth-century, classical tragedy, Andromaque, which is in the public domain. Nevertheless, all activities illustrated by lines from Andromaque can be used just as effectively with simpler, more accessible texts, readily available in textbooks, anthologies and paperback editions.

Descriptions should be taken merely as outlines of prototypes, to be adjusted to each teacher's individual circumstances. Every activity offers multiple challenges and an opportunity

to develop several skills. Depending on the learners' age, goal and competence, some skills will become central and others peripheral; all remain, nonetheless, potentially complementary.

No activity attempts to train theatrical professionals, and students should never feel handicapped if they do not consider themselves "natural actors." Instead, the goals of a dramatic approach to language instruction are to tap the theatrical instinct in all humans; to enable students to acquire, in the target language, some of the expressive and persuasive power that flows from deep conviction born of strong emotion; to use powerful, universal emotions - the stuff of which drama is made - to help students internalize linguistic and psycho-cultural information.

**THE CIRCLE.** The Circle is the most quintessentially theatrical activity adapted for classroom use. It starts as a collective exploration of a text. Students and teacher sit in a circle, on chairs or on the floor. One person is asked to begin by saying the first "meaningful unit" of the text. It immediately becomes that person's responsibility to recognize what can constitute a reasonably self-contained and meaningful unit, given the character, the context, the work and the linguistic parameters involved. Several valid possibilities usually exist. Going around the circle, the next person adds a subsequent meaningful unit and so on. The teacher interrupts, whenever it seems most helpful and least disruptive, to ask questions, make comments and suggestions and, if necessary, correct. While the group gains familiarity with the text, by going around the circle several times, the teacher will probably be led to ask some students to repeat or modify what

they have done. The instructor might also ask one group to read, differently, a segment others have already examined or explore with the entire group alternative units and variations of rhythm, intonation and stress patterns. Gradually, the group will increase its linguistic and intellectual mastery of the text. In the end, it will demonstrate multifaceted understanding and linguistic competence by its ability to deliver the text skillfully, with one collective voice.

Like explication de texte, the circle technique works well with any short prose or verse text, of any period or nature, provided it can sustain close scrutiny. Here it will be used to study the monologue that opens the final act of Andromaque (V/1). The setting is the postwar period following the Trojan War. The Greeks have won, and the Trojans lost. In traditional fashion, the Greeks reward an allied warrior-prince (Pyrrhus), with a politically advantageous engagement to a prominent Greek princess (Hermione). Happily for the Greek princess, she already loves the warrior-prince. Unhappily for him, he is irresistibly drawn to his Trojan captive (Andromaque) which, of course, constitutes a personal and political affront to his fiancée. Just before the final act, the warrior-prince announces his decision to marry his Trojan captive and bids farewell to his Greek fiancée. Impulsively, the Greek princess orders a former suitor to avenge her by killing the warrior-prince. The monologue which begins the tragedy's fifth act traces the anguish, doubts and torment she experiences waiting for her orders to be executed.

- 1) Où suis-je? Qu'ai-je fait? Que dois-je faire encore?
- 2) Quel transport me saisit? Quel chagrin me dévore?
- 3) Errante, et sans dessein, je cours dans ce palais.

- 4) Ah! ne puis-je savoir si j'aime ou si je hais?
- 5) Le cruel! de quel oeil il m'a congédiée!
- 6) Sans pitié, sans douleur, au moins étudiée.
- 7) L'ai-je vu se troubler et me plaindre un moment?
- 3) En ai-je pu tirer un seul gémissement?
- 9) Muet à mes soupirs, tranquille à mes alarmes,
- 10) Semblait-il seulement qu'il eût part à mes larmes?
- 11) Et je le plains encore? Et pour comble d'ennui,
- 12) Mon coeur, mon lâche coeur s'intéresse pour lui?
- 13) Je tremble au seul penser du coup qui le menace?
- 14) Et prête à me venger, je lui fais déjà grâce?

Initially, several students will probably propose their units before the teacher comments. The teacher will then correct as little as possible, rejecting only pronunciation, syntax, intonation, etc. that would be non-functional in the target language. Most of the teacher's commentary will focus on linguistic skills to be developed or questions and suggestions capable of leading to a more intimate knowledge of the text. In many instances these will be inseparable. For example, if participants generally treat a meaningful unit as synonymous with an alexandrin, the characteristic line of classical, French verse, one might ask if and why it is possible to conclude that line 1 contains one, three, or perhaps even two meaningful units. The reply, which might or might not be verbalized, would surely become evident in subsequent delivery of that line. It would also invariably be based on linguistic and psychological factors, though the teacher could emphasize either in response to the group's needs or objectives. The teacher might also request that some students read line 1 as one unit, others as three units and still others as two units. When the development of oral skills is of paramount



importance, phonemes can be stressed, and special attention given to liaisons, both common and unusual yet appropriate in this context. Understatement and the twelve-syllable alexandrin, which constitutes a rather long rhythmic group when it can be read without a caesura (lines 7, 8, 10, 13), characterize classical French tragedy. One can, therefore, emphasize its formal features in order to encourage anglophone students to acquire the relatively even rhythmic pattern and the relatively understated accentuation and melodic patterns of French. In addition, each participant must learn to listen attentively to the preceding segment and develop enough expressive flexibility to advance the reading in a coordinated way.

When the group has made considerable progress - and this may easily take forty-five minutes - a different type of reading concludes the exercise. Individuals are now free to speak in any order and as often as they wish, although it may sometimes be helpful to ask one person to begin. While the group, impelled by the same desire exploited in cloze procedure, still moves inexorably from the beginning of the text toward the end, many fruitful variations can now appear. Several people may simultaneously say a unit, giving a choral delivery. Segments may be repeated, in whole or in part, in similar or different ways, immediately or as echoes. Thus, between lines 3 and 5, line 4 could be read three times, by three different people, each time with a different emphasis. The "qu'ai-je fait" of line 1 or the "le cruel" of line 5 might appear at several moments to punctuate the monologue like a leitmotif. Segments such as "je tremble" or all of line 13 might be heard in anticipation. The creativity of the group will almost always suggest several unexpected but

revealing possibilities. The whole process may be repeated as long as it seems to generate new insights. The overall effectiveness of this final type of reconstruction and its faithfulness to the spirit of the source provide the instructor with a highly accurate indication of multidimensional comprehension.

In literature classes, the circle technique complements nicely more traditionally academic tools such as explication de texte. In language classes, the inherent interest of a carefully chosen text and the desire to do it justice, provide contextual support and increase students' motivation to overcome linguistic barriers blocking expression.

The interaction between the group and the text and between individuals in the group ordinarily provoke unforeseen but productive variations on the circle technique. For example, the teacher could ask student A to say a meaningful unit, have student B repeat A's unit before adding another, then get student C to repeat B's unit before moving the reading still further ahead. In literature classes that examine a play or an author in some depth, students can recall a previously studied text by briefly repeating the final process of the circle technique. Then they can use this review to prepare the analysis of another passage involving the same character or containing an analogous feature.

**THE INTERPRETER.** The fact that communication is a continual process of linguistic and psychological encoding and decoding provides the basis for this activity. Whenever A speaks to B, B immediately decodes A's message as B receives it. This inevitable interpretation reveals what A's words mean in B's



perspective. Should A shout to B, "I'm angry with you," B's psycho-linguistic interpretation will become "you are angry with me," if B is thinking and feeling in terms of a first person/second person relationship. Alternatively, if more distancing has occurred, B will decode A's message in the third person: "s/he is angry with me." In either case, the process requires B to reflect, synthetically, on both the forme and the fond of A's message.

A few lines from a scene (IV/5) that precedes and prepares the monologue already treated can easily illustrate this exercise. At this moment, the warrior-prince (Pyrrhus) infuriates the Greek princess (Hermione) by blandly denying the enormity of his decision to break off their engagement and minimizing the emotions in play.

PYRRHUS

Nos coeurs n'étaient point faits dépendants l'un de  
l'autre;

Je suivais mon devoir, et vous cédiez au vôtre.

Rien ne vous engageait à m'aimer en effet.

HERMIONE

Je ne t'ai point aimé, cruel? Qu'ai-je donc fait?

Hermione may well interpret "nos coeurs n'étaient point faits dépendants l'un de l'autre" without textual change, but her tone and emphasis will undoubtedly be quite different. Pyrrhus had naively attempted to present what he hoped would be accepted as a calming, reassuring fact, justifying their separation. Hermione's interpretation of his words must, by some means, deny this assertion. It might convey stunned

shock, sarcasm or incredulity. The challenge will be to do so without textual change. Pyrrhus' next segment, "je suivais mon devoir, et vous cédiez au vôtre," will demand syntactic, semantic and psychological changes. Hermione will have to make all-important decisions. At this juncture, does she view Pyrrhus as "tu" or "vous?" If she calls him "tu," is it deprecating or intimate? Having made these choices, she will need to combine changes of tone and emphasis with adjustments to verbs, subject pronouns, possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns. The result might become: "tu suivais ton devoir, et je cédaais au mien." Next, Hermione might well transform Pyrrhus' observation, "rien ne vous engageait à m'aimer en effet," into an incredulous exclamation: "rien ne m'engageait à t'aimer en effet!" And this interpretation not only prepares the substance but also the syntax of the heroine's subsequent protest in the original text: "je ne t'ai point aimé . . .?" In turn, Pyrrhus will most likely decode this as either "tu ne m'as point aimé . . . ? Qu'as-tu donc fait?" or "elle ne m'a point aimé. . . ? Qu'a-t-elle donc fait?"

For demonstration purposes, interpretations have remained quite faithful to the original. Thus far, this has not proven technically difficult. Now, however, Hermione's accusatory "cruel" may be somewhat awkward since it will probably require a paraphrase such as "moi, si cruel." If its rendering detracts overly from the primary objective of the exercise, it might be best to omit this apostrophe from Pyrrhus' interpretation. Occasionally, paraphrases or small omissions, intolerable in a performance, may be the best way to maintain momentum in the classroom. On the other hand, free interpretations, based on a sophisticated understanding of

communicative psychology, are an excellent option for a linguistically mature class. An astute student, sensitive to language's complex functions, might thus interpret any or all of Pyrrhus' three assertions as "tu voudrais qu'il en soit ainsi."

The interpreter's exercise usually functions most effectively with dialogues or texts one can treat as such. It also complements particularly well communicative approaches to language training. The teacher may vary it by asking student A to read a meaningful segment, having student B interpret A's segment before replying, getting student A to decode B's reply before continuing and so on. At some point, it might be beneficial for A and B to exchange roles. Interpretation also provides an excellent opportunity to make those chronically mute witnesses, the confidants and the confidentes active commentators on protagonists' lines. In Racine's tragedy, Pyrrhus' mentor (Phoenix), silently observes the scene partially quoted above. Were he to interpret the protagonists' statements, he might begin by: "Vos coeurs n'étaient point faits dépendants l'un de l'autre." Then he would need to determine if he heard Pyrrhus in the second or third person, for he could state with different yet equal validity: "vous suiviez votre devoir" or "il suivait son devoir." He might even, in the privacy of his inner voice, take liberties denied his public voice and say to himself, "tu suivais ton devoir." Furthermore, his second person singular forms might represent either scornful comment on the folly of his charge's behavior or the expression of a close emotional link, binding the two men in a father-son type of relationship. Continuing, Phoenix would usually interpret "et elle cédait au sien." Nevertheless, he could identify, not with the character he is

formally attached to, but with this protagonist's interlocutor. He would then decode the reference to Hermione as "tu cédaïs au tien." Additionally, he might adopt the neutral stance of a detached third-person observer, similar to a Greek chorus, and interpret systematically in the third person: "il suivait son devoir, elle cédaît au sien." Whichever options students explore or retain, all encourage analysis and develop useful linguistic muscles.

The interpreter's exercise need in no way be confined to intellectually and linguistically complex dialogues in classical tragedy. Instructors can use it just as well with straightforward, contemporary texts, such as "Pour Toi mon amour," contained in Jacques Prévert's Paroles which is available in the inexpensive "Livre de Poche" series.

**THE PROMPTER.** By definition, student-prompters have the text and student-actors don't. Prompters cultivate frequently under-developed skills, for their effectiveness depends on the ability to speak softly and quickly, yet clearly. As well, once actors have acquired familiarity with a text, prompters become highly discriminating because they rely on a minimum of carefully chosen words or phrases in order to prompt as seldom as possible. Actors learn to listen very carefully and retain prompted segments before delivering them in a way capable of holding an audience's interest.

Prompting can be carried out in various ways. Students can work around a circle, prompting their neighbors. Prompters may sit in a cluster, with their backs to the imaginary audience addressed by the actors. There might be one prompter for each actor, several prompters for a single actor or several actors

for a sole prompter. Prompters may take turns, prompting in a predictable order, or they may prompt whenever they wish. As in the final stages of the circle exercise, prompters may speak simultaneously so long as they provide actors with adequate indications. If one attempt fails, another prompter may repeat the misunderstood material, in whole or in part. Prompters and actors may work with texts already examined, briefly or in detail, or with completely new material. When the text permits, mimes can join actors, simultaneously taking their cue from prompters.

The Prompter is particularly effective in developing auditory memory, one key to successful language learning through observation and imitation. Because the linguistic burden is reduced by being shared, students participate readily. Instructors may also use a type of vanishing technique, asking prompters to offer actors ever smaller units until the latter can, individually or collectively, recall an entire text without prompting. After using the Prompter to introduce a text, teachers can easily continue studying the same text by the circle or interpreter techniques.

The last two activities elucidate and facilitate mastery of syntactically difficult material. Both can be applied to the continuation of Hermione's monologue where the tortuous vagaries of her syntax eloquently convey her inner turmoil and psychological incoherence.

- 1) Sa mort [de Pyrrhus] sera l'effet de l'amour d'Hermione?
- 2) Ce prince, dont mon coeur se faisait autrefois
- 3) Avec tant de plaisir redire les exploits,
- 4) A qui même en secret je m'étais destinée

- 5) Avant qu'on eût conclu ce fatal hyménée,
- 6) Je n'ai donc traversé tant de mers, tant d'Etats,
- 7) Que pour venir si loin préparer son trépas?
- 8) L'assassiner, le perdre? Ah! devant qu'il expire...

**THE MATCHBOX.** Student-actors start by emptying a box of safety matches on the floor or table in from of them. Then they approach a syntactically complex passage by slowly breaking it into as many small units as reasonable. At the end of each unit, student-actors return one match to its box. Working through lines 2-5 immediately above, student-actors might begin by saying "ce prince" and putting the first match back in its box. They would continue with "dont mon coeur se faisait," returning another match to the box, then add "autrefois," placing yet another match in the box. They would continue in this fashion with "avec tant de plaisir," "redire les exploits," "à qui," "même," "en secret," "je m'étais destinée," "avant qu'on eût conclu," "ce fatal hyménée," until a considerable number of matches had returned to their box. Each teacher would have to find the best compromise between absolute syntactic integrity, which would frown on separating "se faisait" from "redire," and the practical limits of linguistic memory, which might necessitate a few unorthodox breaks. The instructor might find an advantage in feeding small units to students using the prompter technique. In any event, the fastidiousness of the task imposed by the match box exercise helps students forget the length and complexity of their text and concentrate on manageable units which, in turn, reveal the basic structure of convoluted passages.

**HUMAN GEOMETRY.** In this activity, students and/or instructors choreograph linguistically intricate passages. Then, while delivering their text, students move about to create patterns



and shapes that visually express the text's structure and import. For example, one possible choreography of lines 6-8 employs students A, B and C to reproduce their architecture. Initially, all three stand beside each other on an imaginary straight line. A and B are relatively close to each other. C stands a recognizably greater distance from them. Articulating the portion of the text most closely associated with Hermione's "je," A takes two large steps forward and, continuing to look steadfastly ahead, states: "je n'ai donc traversé tant de mers, tant d'Etats." B, representing a sub-voice of Hermione's "je," takes only one large step forward, likewise continuing to look straight ahead, and completes A's idea with: "que pour venir si loin préparer son trépas?" C, somewhat separated from A and B in order to deliver a line dominated by pronouns representing Pyrrhus, now takes two large steps forward. Also looking straight ahead, C explores the startling conclusions of B's utterance: "l'assassiner, le perdre?" Next, A and C turn sharply inward ninety degrees to face one another. They now form a visualization of the mental confrontation, toward which Hermione has been groping, that pits her initial action ("traverser") against its paradoxically tragic result ("assassiner," "perdre"). Facing and looking at each other for the first time, A and C conclude by exclaiming or echoing chorally: "ah! devant qu'il expire..."

When using pedagogical techniques adapted from theatrical practice, it is desirable to remain highly flexible, using as many different activities as appropriate, varying ones used repeatedly, constantly exploring alternatives and encouraging improvisation and individual variation.

Beyond technical considerations, a theatrical approach to language teaching offers further pedagogical and intellectual advantages. It fosters an openness to the text, a sense of discovery and a capacity for surprise that delight and motivate students. Its immediacy and the opportunity it offers to use kinetic energy to reinforce language learning appeal mightily to certain age groups and personality types. Because the theatrical perspective makes virtually no distinction between thought and language, it also allows students to transcend the perennial, academic debate over the relationship of forme to fond. Perhaps most significantly, a theatrical approach based on the troupe model fosters cooperative learning and achievement.

In closing, I would like to express most sincere thanks to Christian Rist, Director of the Studio Classique, and to the members of his troupe for so generously inviting me to share their world. I would also very much like to thank the colleagues who participated in this workshop for their questions, insights, occasional scepticism and enthusiasm. All helped me sharpen my perception of how enjoyably and profitably every classroom can indeed become a stage.

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